

The Christian News-Letter

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READERS of the Christian News-Letter have heard during the past year a good deal about the World Council of Churches. Its prominence has been given to the work of the International Missionary Council, which came into existence more than a quarter of a century before the World Council of Churches, and by its example provided the main stimulus to later developments in international Christian co-operation.¹ The News-Letter could engage in no more

stating task before it comes to an end than to take a look at the position of Christianity in the world as a whole.²

THE DRAMA OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS

The spread of Christianity to almost every country in the world during the past hundred and fifty years has been one of the outstanding events of modern history. The propagation of the Christian faith in non-Christian lands has for

¹ The life of William Paton, who was for fifteen years its general secretary, and who, when a Provisional Committee of a World Council of Churches was formed in 1938, became in addition the joint general secretary with Dr. Visser 't Hooft of the latter body, has just been published (*William Paton* by Margaret Sinclair, S.C.M. Press, 15s.).

² A new *World Christian Handbook* edited by Kenneth G. Grubb and E. J. Bingle (World Dominion Press, £1 1s.) will be published next month. It contains over four hundred pages and includes articles on the religious situation in the different countries and extensive statistical tables, giving such information as is at present available.

NEWS-LETTER

THE WORLD MISSIONARY
TASK OF THE CHURCHES

By

J. H. OLDHAM

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By

PAMELA KEILY

the most part engaged the interest of only a minority of the members of Christian Churches. It was for long an object of derision to many both inside and outside the Church. The picture of Mrs. Jellyby and the jibes of Sydney Smith were the expression of an attitude that was widespread. In spite of this, missionary service often made its appeal to the ablest of the younger Christian generation, and the ranks of missionaries include some world-famous names, like David Livingstone and Grenfell of Labrador, and many men and women who in their time were outstanding figures in the countries in which they laboured. Alongside of these were to be found missionary workers of limited education and, sometimes, of narrow outlook. Like all human agencies Christian missions have made mistakes and have sometimes done harm as well as good. But the remarkable thing is that in spite of shortcomings and failures modern missions have in the past century and a half achieved the astonishing result of making Christianity, in fact as well as in principle, a world religion.

It is not only that there are to-day throughout the world younger Christian Churches with an independent life of their own, and with gifted leaders who can meet on equal terms with those of the older Churches of the West. What is of no less importance is that Christian ideas, largely through the influence of Christian colleges and schools, have penetrated into far wider circles than the membership of the Christian Church. The outlook and action of outstanding personalities such as Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Sun-Yat-Sen, General and Madame Chiang-Kai-Shek and a host of less widely known national leaders have been in varying degrees influenced by contact with Christianity. It is one of the notable surprises of history that an adventure of Christian faith and hope, conceived and carried out for the most part by very ordinary men and women, in the face of obstacles that must have made it appear in the eyes of outsiders a fantastic dream, should have achieved results that are an important factor in contemporary world history.

It is clear, however, that a movement which, however little recognized as such at the time, has been the most

important achievement of Christianity in recent history, is now facing entirely changed conditions. To meet the demands of the new age it must be reborn in some new shape. What that new shape is to be is not yet clear. The International Missionary Council is alive to the range and variety of the questions to which an answer has to be found. It knows that it does not at present possess the answers. But it is determined to search for them. It is initiating consultations and enquiries in the different countries as a means of preparing for an international conference to consider the broad lines of Christian strategy in the new period, and how to present to-day in the most appealing terms the aims of the universal mission of the Church.

What are the new factors that make necessary a radical rethinking of the nature of the world-wide responsibilities of the Christian Church and of the means by which they can be fulfilled?

THE YOUNGER CHURCHES

To begin with the inner development of the missionary movement, the great decisive new factor is the growth of the younger Churches which are the fruit of missionary activity. We have the outstanding example of the formation of the united Church of South India. There are still large areas in the world which are practically unevangelized or where the indigenous Church is small and weak. But in all the main fields of missionary activity the predominant factor is now the indigenous Church. The task of the Western Churches is no longer, as it was throughout the nineteenth century, that of planting Christianity in virgin soil and fostering and superintending its early growth, but the less clearly defined and more difficult task of assisting directly the younger Churches in the discharge of responsibilities that are primarily theirs. A stage has been reached similar to that in the family when the younger members are ready and anxious to stand on their own feet. In the new period the leadership and main initiative must be that of the younger Churches.

That does not mean that aid from the West is no longer needed. We have spoken of the miracle of the younger

Churches—for such it is—but it is also true that, apart from a relatively small number of gifted leaders, they are for the most part still weak and immature. Their membership is recruited to a large extent from the poorest classes in the community. They are in an alarming degree dependent financially on the supporting missions. While there are among them ardent evangelists like Dr. Kagawa of Japan, these younger Churches as a whole have hardly as yet the strength to take upon themselves the main burden of the tremendous world mission of the Church. The experience is only too widespread that the second generation of Christians is apt to turn in upon itself and lose any sense of obligation towards those who remain without.

Leaders of the younger Churches have repeatedly declared that they still need and want the help of missionaries from the older and more experienced Churches of the West. But it is plain that only men and women with exceptional gifts of sympathy, understanding and tact can meet the demands of a situation which contains many possibilities of tension and must always remain delicate.

THE NEW STATE

The remarkable influence of Christian missions on the non-Christian world was largely assisted by the fact that they were the pioneers of western education. Throughout the greater part of a century the outstanding educational institutions in China, India and the Near East were Christian colleges and schools. It was in these that a large proportion of the educated national leaders of these areas received their education. For decades all the schools in pagan Africa were, almost without exception, Christian schools. Missions were also in Asia and Africa the pioneers of western medicine and exercised a widespread healing ministry. They have rendered notable services in the field of agriculture. The contribution of Christian institutions to education, medicine, and agriculture is still immense, and the needs to be met are as great as ever. But almost everywhere to-day governments with vastly greater financial resources than are at the disposal of Christian missions are accepting responsibility

or the provision of these social services. With the expansion of state-provided services, the proportionate share of Christian institutions in these fields must inevitably diminish, though the share of Christian teachers, nurses, and doctors in state services may be a very important one.

The maintenance of Christian institutions, even of theological colleges and training institutions indispensable to the vigorous life of the Church itself, makes financial demands that are entirely beyond the resources of the younger Churches. In view of the rapidly rising costs the subventions that are still needed from the Churches of the West will not be easy to provide. The missionary boards and societies are facing entirely changed conditions which call for a new strategy—combined, unified and worked out in closest consultation with the younger Churches.

CONFLICT

The modern missionary movement in its first beginnings had in many areas of the non-Christian world to knock for long at closed doors, which only slowly opened. It was only later that there came a remarkable period of almost world-wide missionary freedom. There were still some closed areas, and others in which missionary work was subject to considerable restrictions. But the general picture was of a world in which the Gospel was freely proclaimed. The prestige of Europe was at its height. Liberal ideas were in the ascendant. Countries that desired to be regarded as civilized felt it incumbent on them to conform to the principle of religious toleration.

All this is changed. Communism is in principle hostile to religion. Christianity finds itself face to face to-day throughout the world with one of the most formidable opponents it has ever encountered in its history. The historical parallel which leaps to the mind is the conflict thirteen centuries ago between Christianity and Islam, which swept over lands nominally Christian and ousted Christianity from the countries of the middle and nearer East and northern Africa. Communism has established itself over a

large part of China and is everywhere acting as a powerful ferment among the peoples of Asia and Africa. It is possible that its greatest and most significant triumphs may be in Asia.

It may be that among Asiatic peoples Communism may assume a different form from that which it has elsewhere displayed. But the evidence thus far available points to the likelihood that Communist governments will do all in their power to restrict within narrow limits, if not to eradicate, Christian activities. In particular, the state may be expected to bring education entirely under its own control and eliminate Christian activity from this field. Information about the spread of Communism in China and its effects on the Christian Church has already been given in recent issues of the *News-Letter*.¹ The situation is at the present time much too fluid to permit of any safe generalization.

Islam has always been intolerant of other religions, and Moslem countries are less open than formerly to influences which might lead them to mitigate their intransigence.

If doors are closed that were formerly open to missionary activity, that does not remove the obligation of the Christian Church to proclaim its message to the whole world. The missionary boards and societies are generally agreed that they will maintain their work in China so long as it is possible to do so. In northern China there seems to have been a marked improvement in the situation in the past few months, and some of the British missionary societies feel justified in sending out fresh recruits. The time has certainly not yet come to rule out the possibility that in the matter of religious toleration the Chinese attitude may be different from that of the Kremlin.

Already in some of these difficult situations in different parts of the world young Christian leaders with the help of missionary colleagues are showing that there are new—if precarious and dangerous—ways of bearing Christian witness in the new conditions.

¹ C. N-L. Nos. 328, 337.

THE MISSIONARY CALL

So far as the Churches of the West are concerned there appears to be no drying up of missionary interest. On the contrary, that interest appears to be more widespread than ever. Missionary giving has reached in recent years unprecedented heights. The decline in the number of lavish individual benefactors has been largely offset by the increased number of smaller contributions. The available evidence shows this to be true of Great Britain, the United States and Scandinavia.

On the other hand, in spite of the higher level of giving and its more widely spread basis, the missionary societies may before long be facing the greatest financial crisis in their history. Costs all over the world are rising out of all proportion to the increase in giving. The principle of a whole-time Christian ministry has been accepted by the younger Churches but has in relatively few instances been fully carried out in practice. The goal of self-support seems as far from being reached as ever. The younger Churches have not in general been able to maintain a village ministry without assistance from the missions. The problem has acquired a new acuteness not only through the rapid rise of living costs and of the market value of coolie or peasant labour (with which the payment of the village ministry in China, India, and Africa at one time compared favourably), but also through the separation which has become inevitable of the functions of teacher and pastor. Until recently local pastoral service could be provided in many instances by a teacher, who was subsidized by Government. That stage is rapidly passing for good.

If the support of the western Churches for the world-wide mission of the universal Church is to be maintained, the home constituency must be educated to understand the radically changed conditions. A new basis of appeal is needed, which has not yet been formulated. At an earlier stage the participation of home congregations in the missionary enterprise was direct and evident. They sent out and supported their own agents for evangelistic work abroad in the same way that they themselves engaged in evangelistic

activities at home. They could speak rejoicingly of "our" converts. It is a more difficult task to enlist their sympathy, prayers and support for the younger Churches, which desperately need their interest and support, but can receive it only on their own terms. The missionary movement has reached a turning-point at which there is an imperative need of a new apprehension of the essential meaning of the missionary obligation.

No programme, however excellent in itself, will amount to anything unless men and women in both the younger and the older Churches dedicate themselves to its realization. The missionary societies are at present short of candidates, and in particular are getting too few of the type of men and women qualified to meet the demands of the situation that has been described. This fact is engaging the attention of the Student Christian Movement and the World Student Christian Federation. There are signs of a stirring of a new interest among students in the world-wide Church, which found expression in a conference in Holland last year attended by a hundred and thirty students from thirty different countries who came together to examine with fresh eyes the responsibilities and needs of the universal Church.

STRATEGY OF THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

The importance of the questions to which the International Missionary Council is directing its attention is seen in a fresh light when we think of the strategy of the universal Church in the present state of the world. It may well be that the main advances of Christianity in the next few generations may be in areas that have never formed part of Christendom. In the countries in which it has long been the prevailing religion it has to contend with the handicap that its message has in the ears of many acquired a certain staleness. They think that they have laid their account with the Church and are consequently impervious to its message. A French priest, working in rural France, has recently described his disheartening experience among the dechristianized population. "I have been struck and pained," he writes, "by the discomfort of this depreciated religion.

suffer much from being obliged to give the sacraments to people in whom there is no inward response. I would like to bring them the Good News, but they have become so saturated to it as to see in religion nothing but a kind of social conformity and to be able no longer to understand that it has any meaning beyond baptism, communion, marriage, and burial."¹ In lands in which the Christian message is unknown and is seen to involve an entirely new outlook on life, there is a greater prospect of its finding a welcome among those who have become dissatisfied with traditional ideas and ways of life. It has been remarked that the unsurpassed contribution of the early fathers to Christian theology may have its explanation in the fact that practically all of them up to St. Augustine, and even after him, were converts from paganism and embraced the Christian faith as offering a more adequate interpretation of the meaning of life than the systems in which they had been reared. Transplanted to new soil the Church may gain a fresh access of vigour and an enriched understanding of its faith, which will in turn set in motion new vitalizing currents in the older Churches of the West.

THE SUPPLEMENT

A bold and successful experiment has been carried out in the Sheffield Diocese in the use of religious drama in churches, clubs and even factories. Readers will probably guess that Miss Keily, who describes this work impersonally, is herself responsible both for the imaginative conception and for the hard work of organization.

M. Keily

¹ *Journal d'un Catéchumène. Les Editions du Cerf. Paris.*

CAN THESE BONES LIVE ?

By PAMELA KEILY

“ To : The Producer and the Youth Welfare Worker.

Having seen and enjoyed ‘ Go Down Moses ’, I feel impelled to offer my sincerest congratulations. The production, acting, and elocution in my opinion achieved surprisingly high standards, and the enthusiasm of the actors was remarkable.

Accordingly, I offer as a suggestion that during the forthcoming ‘ Sheffield Fortnight ’ the play is acted in some Church or Chapel as part of the Celebrations. It would, I think, be a fine example to the Youth of other Works and would emphasize the fact the ‘ Dogs ’, ‘ Pictures ’, etc., are not the pre-occupations of all our youth.

Thank you very much.

A. NEWMAN.

(No. 1 Mill Chippers) ”

This letter was written by one of the “ hands ” in a Sheffield Steel Works after he had seen the younger employees performing religious drama of a high order.

How had it begun ? Indeed, why should folk in a steel works ever do religious drama at all ?

For five years Sheffield had employed a full-time professional actress to produce this type of play. At the start the experiment had been mainly intended to raise the standard of drama among church groups. The notion that any drama called religious must be necessarily improving, probably rather pious, and undoubtedly boring, had first to be extirpated. The best way of attacking this assumption was to show that in reality no drama that was bad art could be true “ religious ” drama. The divorce from real life of the many bad plays done in church or hall, the tendency to spinelessness, or the thrusting of some one-sided idea on an unwilling audience, had brought the medium of religious drama into deservedly bad repute.

During the war, the Pilgrim Players had done much to counteract this, by setting a professional standard and introducing a

technique that often deliberately incorporated the audience into the performance. Mr. Martin Browne was the pioneer of what became later known in the theatre as the "suit-case racket". What he did was to take the theatre to the people, into out-geously cramped and primitive settings. With the minimum of theatrical equipment, the Pilgrims endeavoured to set a high artistic standard, and to supply a level of performance that might have been witnessed in the theatre, to which war conditions were preventing people from going. The productions of the Pilgrims were kept in the specialized category of "religious drama". This meant plays that were, in the widest sense, of spiritual significance, and that had to do with the relationship between God and man.

EXPERIMENT IN SHEFFIELD

The experiment in Sheffield was an outcome of their work. The Pilgrims had visited the city before it was blitzed. They were asked to return afterwards to help in restoring the atmosphere of normality. Later, one of their number went at the invitation of the Association of Christian Communities to make a report on whether work with religious drama would be of value in an industrial city. Could the medium of drama be used both to present the Gospel to men who had never really heard it, and also to strengthen and illumine those who were already regular church or chapel goers?

The first step in financing an ex-Pilgrim Player to report on the situation was taken by the Religious Drama Society. In the course of a month's investigation it became evident that any artistic endeavour must be worth while in a city given over to production of steel and iron goods. Convinced of this, the Youth Committee of the Association of Christian Communities in Sheffield took the plunge by making a three-months appointment. This was later extended to an offer of a year or three years. By the end of six months, the Local Education Authorities were paying half the salary. The initiative was due to a few people who had sufficient vision and faith to take a step that was to justify their belief in the intrinsic value of religious drama—despite the blight of its previous reputation. The Education Committee, recognizing the value of what was happening, gave a grant as soon as one or two productions had taken place.

ENTRY TO A STEEL WORKS

Recently, after five years of growing response, this form of drama has entered a Steel Works. It is also getting a footing in many another unexpected quarter of the city, for instance the pub. This has happened after five years' experimentation. It has been proved that through the medium of the theatre it is possible to bring alive many truths already known or half known. The choice of plays that are deliberately provocative produces controversy, and this in itself has a livening effect. The whole purpose might be summed up in the words: "To bring alive". This has meant finding plays that have some point of contact with the people who act in them. Only if they have a bearing on life here and now, will they make a vital impact on those who witness and on those who act in them. It is said on every side that the traditional methods of presenting the Christian faith have ceased to connect with life as we now live it. There can be a dynamic quality in good drama that exhilarates and enlivens, where previously there were only apathy and boredom. This at any rate was the effect of the experiment in the Steel Works, and it may be of interest to describe what happened.

Entry into this setting was made possible through an enlightened manager who had watched a religious play in a Church Youth Club. There he saw girls and boys of the kind employed in his works, who were literally on fire with enthusiasm for what they were doing. This experience made a lasting impression on him and, when two and a half years later the producer of the play called on him, he expressed a desire that the more youthful of his employees should take a course in learning to act. He took the view that the play he had seen previously would be far too ambitious for those who had never acted before. The producer, however, held fast to the importance of a "point of contact" and to the fact that she was employed as a specialist in religious drama. She was confident that a play that had worked wonders on a club in the same locality would connect with the life of folk inside a works as well as outside. There was good strong language—even though it was a religious play!

"There's going to be a bloody execution.

We're going to take it out of a traitor to the people."

This, right away in scene 1, was the familiar phraseology of daily life.

"You told the officer on duty, didn't you,
That I wasn't baking his blasted mud into bricks
Didn't you? . . .
But was taking a quiet hour off in the straw-loft
With a lady friend, didn't you?"
"With my wife, damn you."

his expression of emotion among the children of Israel in bondage, though not exactly the usual form of language used in religious plays, at once makes a point of contact that can be understood in the industrial world. What is more, the Israelites' strong resentment against their state of bondage strikes a chord in the experience of those who are in bondage to modern materialism. Further, the theology of "Go Down Moses" by Philip Massinger is so sound that even the Community of the Resurrection have performed it happily. Here then was a play in which the "tough" might apprehend some measure of the Truth, if he would throw himself vigorously into it.

There, of course, was the difficulty.

FIRST STEPS

A start was made on an afternoon in April, 1948, when a "talk" was to be given "to awaken interest". The producer was let in ostensibly to tackle an acting class, but with every intention of doing her own specialized work. From a distance there is something splendid about attacking the seemingly impossible. When it comes to the point, it induces rather different sensations.

The building outside looked like a hangar. In the hall allotted to the proposed activity, a number of boys and girls were seated in a semi-circle. Their appearance ranged from flamboyant sophistication to inertia in grimy dungarees. A devastating sense of being on trial assailed the newcomer. Could she hope to awaken any sparks of interest, while talking in an incomprehensible language? One lad, planted in the centre, had a slight illumination in his eye, which at least he kept glued to the speaker. She kept hers glued to his face, desperately fighting down a sense that the surrounding bodies were there only because it meant "time off" for the afternoon. What on earth were they thinking—or were they thinking at all? Since books of the play she hoped to do had already been procured and terror

from him. The chorus inertly wandered round making a feeble attempt to do what they had been told, but with singularly little appearance of interest. A second run-through was decided on. And this time something happened—not very much, but enough to make the assembled gathering say that the venture must continue. Egged on by the producer, those who watched put in an encouraging word here and there, and the decision was taken to go ahead. This had an encouraging repercussion for a week or two. Then summer holidays began, with alternate members of the cast taking a week off. The producer herself had eventually to stop, but before her holiday started a concentrated time-table of rehearsals was fixed for ten days in September. While she was away, the lines went on being taught by the stage-manager. During the final ten days there were almost daily rehearsals. Even then the enterprise all but collapsed, as another of the main characters was called-up. But again the miraculous occurred, for a member of the 1946 Youth Club cast took on the vacant part with the enthusiasm that had been engendered by his earlier experience of the play.

CULMINATION

It was the last lap that did it. By the time of the dress rehearsal vitality was no longer in question. Nor was there doubt about enthusiasm. Perhaps the best result of all was the release of Moses from his self-consciousness. The dead had indeed come alive.

No one can say what deeper results there may have been. One can but report that there has been a request for more; that the audience which came was a predominantly “works” audience; and that the manager wanted to give a further performance at another branch in Essex.

When a play is as sound in its theology as this one, the gulf of incomprehension is in some measure bridged by the experience of living it out. One person who saw this performance said of the boy who took the part of Moses that he was “apprehended by what his mind could not fully grasp”.

Members' Copies for Binding—Arrangements are being made to bind the 1949 issues of the C.N.L., including index, in dark green board with black lettering at a cost of 3s. 6d. Copies for previous years can also be bound if desired at 3s. 6d. per set. **Copies to be bound should reach this office by 30th July, 1949.**

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